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Title:

Theory and practice of return migration at retirement: the case of migrant worker hostel residents in France

Keywords:

France; hostel accommodation; retirement; return migration; social systems.

Abstract:

The transition to retirement marks an appropriate juncture for older migrants to relocate to the country of origin if so desired. As recent survey data from France demonstrates, most older immigrants are well integrated and prefer to live out their old age in the host country. This article examines return decisions at retirement in the case of older men living in migrant worker hostel accommodation, who seem on first inspection to be far from integrated in France. Despite this lack of integration, they tend not to return definitively to places of origin at retirement. Instead, their preference is for regular back-and-forth trips. In order to make sense of these mobility decisions, several theories of migration are presented and evaluated against qualitative data from interviews conducted in several hostels in the Paris region in spring and summer 2008. While no one theory adequately accounts for all the phenomena observed, the evaluation shows that at various points in the data there is support for several theories. The added value of each theory becomes most apparent when levels of analysis are kept distinct: at the household level as regards remittances; at the kinship and village level as regards re-integration in the home context; at the meso level in terms of migrants' transnational ties; and at the macro level concerning inclusion in healthcare and administrative systems.

*“It’s over here. I don’t understand the people who stay here all the time –
they’re not right in the head.”*

(Moroccan hostel resident, Gennevilliers)

A dominant representation of the post-World War 2 labour migration to Europe was the youth, if not agelessness, of the migrant workers. “So far as the economy of the metropolitan country is concerned, migrant workers are immortal... they do not age: they do not get tired: they do not die” (Berger and Mohr, 1975: 64). This myth of agelessness can no longer be entertained. Those who were once young and gainfully employed have now reached, or are approaching, retirement age. The transition to retirement means a lifting of the sedentary constraint of participation in the labour market, and thus marks an appropriate juncture for older migrants to relocate to the country of origin if so desired (White, 2006). However, as a recent survey from France demonstrates, the preference of most retired immigrants is to live out their old age in the host country, reflecting the normative (European) image of retirement as a time of repose surrounded by family members. The survey found that in this and other measures, the transition to retirement of most immigrants in France was above all a process of “integrated ageing” (Attias-Donfut et al., 2005).

This article examines return decisions at retirement in the case of older men living in migrant worker hostel accommodation, who seem on first inspection to be far from integrated in France. Despite this lack of integration, they tend not to return definitively to places of origin at retirement. Instead, their preference is for regular back-and-forth trips. In order to make sense of these mobility decisions, several theories of migration will be presented and evaluated against qualitative data from interviews conducted in several hostels in the Paris region in spring and summer 2008. While no one theory adequately accounts for all the phenomena observed, the evaluation shows that at various points in the data there is support for several theories. The added value of each theory becomes most apparent when levels of analysis are kept distinct.

1. Residence at Retirement: the puzzle of *geographically single* hostel residents

While many hypotheses have circulated about the determinants of the decision to settle or return, empirical evidence and quantitative analyses have regrettably remained limited. Partially as a response to this lack of data, as well as to better know the scale and scope of the needs of older immigrants, in 2003 the French old-age pension agency (*Caisse nationale d'assurance vieillesse*), and the national statistics and economic studies institute (*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*), conducted a survey on the “Passage to Retirement of Immigrants” (PRI). A significant section of the PRI survey was devoted to the mobility and residential decisions of immigrants at or near retirement. The survey's principal findings in this latter regard underline the settled situation of most older immigrants in France. A clear majority of the sample – 60% – indicated a firm preference for living out their old age in France. 25% indicated the intention to divide their time between France and their country of origin, living a few months of the year in each, referred to as the *va-et-vient* option. This expression is translatable in English as “coming and going”. Most tellingly, only 6% of the sample foresaw a definitive return to their place of birth.

The PRI research team found that those most likely to prefer settlement: (1) had children who were resident in France; (2) owned property in France; and (3) had acquired French nationality. However, my initial fieldwork alerted me to the presence in France of immigrants whose decision-making at retirement does not conform to these measures of settlement or “implantation” (Mesrine and Thave, 1999). I am referring here to those migrants discussed in the French migration literature as *faux célibataires* or “geographically single” men. Despite living far away from wives and children who have remained in the country of origin, some older migrants choose not to return on a definitive basis at the end of their working lives. Emblematic of this family situation are the older men living in migrant worker hostels (*Foyers de travailleurs migrants*). Only 32% of hostel residents have remained unmarried, and just 28% have not fathered a child – one in two residents have 4 children or more (Gallou and Rozenkier, 2006). Judging by the other settlement measures, they likewise appear minimally implanted. Property ownership in France is negligible given that they reside in hostels; if they do own property it is in the country of origin. The vast majority of residents have retained the nationality of their birthplace – only 6% of residents have taken French nationality.

Despite their lack of affective ties to France and their retention of ties to the place of origin, the hostel residents do not return to their roots definitively at retirement. Rather, the preference is for the principal place of residence to remain the hostel in France, using it as a base for regular back-and-forth trips between the hostel and the family home in the country of origin. The *va-et-vient* is the overwhelming preference of the hostel residents. According to the management of 75 hostels questioned in a recent survey, 95% of retired residents regularly make these short return trips (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki, 2006). Data provided to me by the Adoma hostel company confirms the salience of this phenomenon for older residents, with surveyed hostels reporting *va-et-vient* rates of between 80 and 90% for residents over the age of 56.

These empirical mobility patterns raise the following theoretical puzzle: if the geographically single hostel residents are not integrated in conventional reference groups in France (family, property and nationality) and instead retain ties to homeland groups, why don't they return definitively at retirement when the economic rationale for their presence in France expires? What generates the back-and-forth mobility at retirement? By way of an answer, alternative theories of migration and return will be presented in section 2. Section 3 then evaluates these theories in the light of data collected in several hostels in the Paris region during the spring and summer of 2008. Before this, however, further details on the accommodation itself, and the mobility patterns of the residents, are required.

1. 1 The context of the labour migrant hostels

In post-war Europe, the provision of hostel accommodation for migrant workers has been portrayed as something of a French speciality (Bernardot, 1997; Hmed, 2006), but this is not strictly the case. Hostel accommodation was used to house a significant proportion of the 90,000 European Voluntary Workers (EVWs) who came to the UK between 1946 and 1951 (Stadulis, 1952; Bülbring, 1954; Phillips et al., 2007), while in West Germany, employers were obliged by the Federal authorities to provide accommodation for guest workers. Such accommodation frequently took the form of

communal hostel facilities (Dreyer, 1961; Castles and Kosack, 1972). Be this as it may, it was in France that this form of housing for migrants took its fullest expression, under the impulsion of the French state. Governments of neighbouring labour-importing countries were generally content to delegate responsibility for lodging migrants to market forces (Castles et al., 1984; Bernardot, 1999). In France, the authorities felt it necessary to intervene in this sector and invested a great deal of money and administrative energy in the creation of hostel-type housing solely for labour migrants¹, initially catering exclusively for migrants of Algerian origin, thereafter men from other sending regions, especially former colonies in North and West Africa. These actions were initiated through the majority state-owned Sonacotral company (*Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs algériens*)², created in 1956.

At the time of the last census in 1999, the hostels housed some 80,000 immigrants, 63% of whom were from North Africa, with a further 28% of West African origin (Renaut, 2006). This represents a drop of around 20,000 people compared with the preceding census in 1990, and indicates a significant decrease from the 264,800 beds available in the mid-1970s heyday of the hostels (Lévy-Vroelant, 2007). Many individuals, then, have left the hostels promptly as expected, some returning to countries of origin, a larger portion reuniting in France with families and moving into private accommodation. That the hostels continue to operate is not, with few exceptions, due to younger migrants replacing their forerunners. On the contrary, the vast majority of current hostel residents have “aged within the walls” of the hostels (Renaut, 2006: 175; author's translation). The average age of hostel residents jumped from 46 years to 51.7 between 1990 and 1999 (Renaut, 2006). As of 2007, one in two Adoma residents was over 55 (Adoma, 2007). The ageing of the hostel residents has been accompanied by a progressive impoverishment. This is not surprising when one considers that (1) the hostels have always housed a poorly paid population in relative terms, and (2) the passage to retirement invariably means a fall in income.

1.2 The mobility patterns of retired hostel residents

As noted above, the vast majority of hostel residents have been observed to travel back-

and-forth between France and countries of origin at retirement. What patterns in (1) timing, (2) regularity and (3) duration are observed in practice? The practices of North Africans can usefully be distinguished from West African hostel residents, but for both origin groups the *timing* established during working life continues into retirement. North Africans residents, when they were working, tended to return every year during the summer holidays. This preference persists at retirement, with a fall in occupancy rates for 'North African' hostels³ observable from late-May through September. West African residents, during working life, preferred the cooler harvest period following the end of the rainy season in October and avoided if possible the hottest and wettest period between May and August. Retired West Africans that I spoke to avoid returning home at this time too, as it is hard to adapt to the change in climate.

As regards *regularity* and *duration* of home trips, however, patterns observed during working life do not persist into retirement. West Africans, when they were working, tended to stay two or even three years at a stretch in France before returning to see their families, having accumulated several months' leave. At retirement, the norm for West Africans residents is an extended period of residence in the home village, totalling 10 months per year or more, with only a short visit to France every year or two. It is for this reason that it is rare to find older West Africans in hostels. For North African residents, on the other hand, the total duration spent back home is much more variable. Some residents will spend only a month or two annually in France; others will spend only a month or two back home. Overall, however, North Africans tend to do more *va-et-vient* trips, two or three times a year, especially in summer as noted, but also at Ramadan and for family occasions such as weddings.

2. Alternative theories of migration and return

Given that the approach based on family, property and nationality reference groups cannot account for hostel residents' prolonged presence in France at retirement, it would be fruitful to look at other theories of settlement and return. This section will outline alternative theories drawing on economics, home community social structures, transnationalism, and social systems. For each approach, the relevant explanatory

variables are identified, leading to a discussion of applicability regarding return at retirement, before concluding with an assessment of overall strengths and weaknesses.

2.1 Neoclassical Economics

As Larry Sjaastad was able to observe of migration theory as early as 1962, “the main concern of economists has been with the response of individuals to economic opportunity at a distance” (Sjaastad, 1962:80). Broadly told, the approach here has been to analyse migration in terms of the costs and benefits of moving, taking into account monetary as well as non-monetary factors. A “core variable” is wage differentials (Dustmann, 2001: 1), attributing the individual's decision to relocate to his or her expectations of wage differentials between sending and receiving countries (Harris and Todaro, 1970). This applies to first-time emigrants as well as subsequent migration decisions such as return. Regarding this latter scenario, “for a deliberate return it is necessary that the difference between the benefit and the cost of being in the host country is decreasing over the migration history, and that a point exists where costs overtake benefits” (Dustmann, 1996: 226-7).

In a situation of retirement, where employment and wage earnings are no longer at stake, the usual neoclassical cost-benefit calculation of wages needs to be reformulated. Wage differentials in such a situation are irrelevant. Rather, what is relevant is the purchasing power of one's pension (De Coulon and Wolff, 2006; Klinthäll, 2006). Cooperation worldwide between sending and receiving countries on social security means that in most cases pensions are exportable in their entirety, minus any currency exchange fees and deductions made by state social security agencies. For those migrants who have migrated from non-OECD countries to affluent European states, the higher purchasing power of the host country pension in the home country can be taken as a given. Return in such scenarios is the rational choice from the neoclassical perspective.

A considerable plus point of the neoclassical approach is above all its theoretical neatness and predictive potential regarding who migrates and under what circumstances. Yet, often these predictions do not match with the evidence base, most notably when

people's migration behaviour does not tally with favourable wage differentials or purchasing power considerations. A further criticism is that in the neoclassical approach, to migrate is only ever an individual decision, a perspective which isolates migrants from their social context. Neoclassical accounts also find it difficult to account for the widespread practice of remittance sending. These latter two points can be more fruitfully unpacked using what has been termed the new economics of labour migration.

2.2 The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM)

In contrast to the neoclassical focus on the individual, the new economics approach places remittances and the “utility-maximizing family” (Stark, 1991: 208) at the centre of analysis. Oded Stark argued that migration must be viewed as a strategy for insuring against risk to household income, with the family, rather than the individual, as the decision-making unit. Stark's analysis is built on three premises which challenged the previously dominant neoclassical ‘expected income’ approach: “there is more to labor migration” than both (1) individual utility-maximising behaviour, and (2) wage differentials, and furthermore (3) migration is a response to imperfectly functioning credit and insurance markets (ibid: 3-4). Summarising the new economics of labour migration, Stark writes:

“The underlying idea is that for the household as a whole it may be a ... superior strategy to have members migrate elsewhere, either as a means of risk sharing or as an investment in access to higher earnings streams. Remittances may then be seen as a device for redistributing gains, with relative shares determined in an implicit arrangement struck between the migrant and the remaining family. The migrant adheres to the contractual arrangement so long as it is in his or her interest to do so. This interest may be either altruistic or more self-seeking, such as concern for inheritance or the right to return home ultimately in dignity” (ibid: 236-7).

Regarding this last point on return migration, the NELM principle of household risk-sharing means that the returning migrant can count on reciprocal support from the

household in the place of origin at the end of working life when income drops. The return – long foreseen – of the geographically single migrant to his family remaining back home is thus a logical final step of the migration project. Taking the NELM approach, Amelie Constant and Douglas Massey (2002) show that remitting regularly and having a spouse in the home country is strongly correlated to retirement return.

In summary, the NELM approach significantly advances our understanding of the social context in which migration takes place, most notably in the realm of remittances as household insurance. The individualistic utility-maximising neoclassical approach tends to see remittances as irrational, and can only explain this phenomenon through recourse to the thorny concept of altruism. However, the critique can be made that the new economics literature limits the migrants' social context to the immediate household, ignoring broader social structures in the home community.

2.3 Structural explanations

In the structuralist perspective on return migration, the decision to return is not solely a utility-maximising calculation; one must additionally take into account social, institutional, and contextual factors in the place to which migrants are planning to return. These factors can be summarised as “vested interests and traditional ways of thinking” (Cerase, 1974: 258), and include: political structures such as coalitions of local notables, landlords, and politicians; economic structures such as the dominant sectors and modes of production, as well as the interests of the owners of the means of production; and finally the normative values structuring social relations in a given context.

Structuralism is a perspective emerging from studies in sociology and anthropology, with Francesco Cerase's research on the return of southern Italians from the USA being a pioneering work here. In his celebrated article, “Expectations and Reality” (1974), Cerase posited four motivations or types of return: returns of failure; returns of conservatism; returns of innovation; and returns of retirement. The “detachment” (ibid: 251) of retired émigrés stems from the fact that the individuals in this category tend not

to have raised a family in the host society and therefore have “no one to whom they can bequeath the results of their efforts and aspirations. Advancing age and other dissatisfactions in the new society may cause real suffering, which can be relieved only by a return home” (ibid). In Cerase’s reading, those in the retirement return category, since they reinforce rather than challenge local political and economic structures, find it relatively easy to re-adapt to life in the community of origin.

While the structural perspective is invaluable in that it sheds light on the process of re-integration in areas of origin which is too often ignored by researchers in host countries, two critiques can be levelled at this approach. First of all, structural accounts can be critiqued for arguing that the process of return is mediated by structural conditions *only in the home community*, ignoring structural conditions in host countries. Secondly, the principal reason for the difficulties encountered following return in structuralist accounts is that migrants have “remained for too long outside the ‘traditional ways of thinking’ in their origin societies” (Cassarino, 2004: 261). The implication is that migrants do not maintain links with their places of origin. This latter point is challenged most directly by those working from a transnationalism perspective.

2.4 Transnationalism

The term ‘transnationalism’ as it refers to migration describes ties that migrants in host states maintain with their homelands. Such ties can be material or symbolic, and can take economic, political or socio-cultural forms. The transnationalism literature sets out a range of necessary empirical conditions for the emergence and importantly the retention over time of cross-border ties. These conditions include ease of mobility, ease of communications, as well as the social and political contexts of sending and receiving countries (Portes et al., 1999; Itzigsohn, 2000; Kivisto, 2001; Faist, 2004). While transnationalism is generally used to describe migrants’ ties with people and places back home rather than migratory movement per se, clearly such movement is a necessary pre-condition for these ties. Going further, it has been argued that transnationalism constitutes a form of return migration in itself:

“[C]ontrary to the perspective of northern governments, where any return that involves re-emigration is seen as indicating a failure of the sustainability of return (...), an alternative view would suggest that in order for their return to be sustainable, returnees need to retain continued access to the wider international professional and social world in which they have worked and lived... It is the ability to return and reemigrate – to circulate, in other words – that underpins transnationalism” (Black and King, 2004: 80).

In sum, regular participation in transnational activities such as home visits, remittance sending, and keeping abreast of economic and political developments in the place of origin means that retired hostel residents are better prepared for return. The most obvious contribution of the transnational literature regarding return is that it is able to move beyond narrow formulations that restrict the decision to a straight choice between definitive settlement and definitive return. Rather, the transnational approach shows that return no longer needs to be viewed as the end of the migration project. Such an approach is much better able to comprehend the *va-et-vient* phenomenon. Transnationalism is not without its critics however. In addition to the conceptual fuzziness for which this literature is sometimes noted, the transnational account comes under fire for the determinism it attributes to inherited membership in ethnic and kinship groups. As Cassarino (2004: 265) notes: “[T]he transnational approach to return migration seems to encapsulate [migrants'] initiatives and projects at home in a fundamental set of mutual obligations, opportunities and expectations stemming from common ethnicity (i.e., the diaspora) and kinship (i.e., the family, the household).”

2.5 Social Systems

By contrast, a recently emerging approach in migration studies employs a theory of society in which there is no place for pre-ascribed membership in kinship and ethnic groups. Instead of society being constituted of whole human beings in ‘big groups’ of individuals, Niklas Luhmann proposed an alternative theory whereby society is constituted by individuals’ communication in different social realms such as the economy, law, politics, religion, the family, education, and healthcare (Luhmann, 1995).

In *principle*, access to these communicative systems is open to every social agent, since the differentiation of society into functions such as politics and law rather than social strata such as classes no longer permits discrimination on the basis of inherited or ascribed characteristics. In *practice*, inclusion in function systems is processed through organisations such as courts, hospitals, firms, schools, and so on, which only discriminate on the basis of whether function-specific “rules of access” are satisfied or not (Luhmann, 1990: 35). In other words, whether a candidate for a job has a certain qualification, whether one is ill or not, whether one’s legal status is recognised under such and such a jurisdiction.

Authors have used Luhmann’s ideas to interpret phenomena in many social domains, including that of migration. Regarding the latter, scholars have viewed migration as being driven by functional differentiation, since the organisations of society – with the exception of the national welfare state in the political system – are increasingly unconcerned by demarcations of territory or national belonging and other ascribed attributes (Bommes and Geddes, 2000; Halfmann, 2000, 2005). On the one hand, functional differentiation means that individuals are no longer so constrained by characteristics such as birthplace, gender, ethnicity, nationality, social class etc. One result of this is that they are free – and, furthermore, normatively encouraged – to migrate in order to achieve inclusion in organisations elsewhere (Bommes and Geddes, 2000). On the other hand, however, functional differentiation means that migrants are constrained, not by inherited characteristics, but by the same requirements for inclusion in the organisations of functionally differentiated society that non-migrants are also subject to. The transition to retirement means that migration is no longer primarily about employment in the firms of the economic system. What becomes much more important at this stage in the lifecourse is inclusion in the organisations of the healthcare and bureaucratic welfare systems, in order to access goods such as medical treatment and pensioners’ allowances.

Applying the theory of functional differentiation has radical implications for approaches to migration and return, not least of which is the question of migrants’ agency in relation to social structures. By including individuals only partially in society,

Luhmann's non-humanist approach explicitly sets out to challenge action theory accounts based on an "unreflected concept of human agency" (King and Thornhill, 2003: 276-7). The requirements for inclusion in function systems constrain the individual's range of possible actions, but this does not necessarily deny the potential for agency. Individuals direct their own inclusion in systems (Bommes, 2000), and can try to ignore functional differentiation (Moeller, 2006), although the risks of this are high (Bommes, 2000).

3. Evaluation of Theories

To evaluate these respective theories, data collected during interview-based fieldwork with residents of several hostels will be examined. This fieldwork was conducted in three hostels in the town of Gennevilliers in the northern suburbs of Paris, and a further three in, respectively, Paris (13th *arrondissement*), and the western suburbs of Boulogne-Billancourt and Courbevoie. In total, I have conducted some 52 loosely structured interviews with hostel residents at or near retirement age. I will also draw upon interviews with healthcare professionals, union delegates, and representatives of migrants' rights associations. All interviews were conducted in French⁴. This fieldwork covers the period from April to July 2008. For reasons of confidentiality, respondents' names have been changed.

3.1 Dependence-Assistance: the arguments from economics

In section 2, it was argued that the purchasing power of the individual's pension is the crucial independent variable in the neoclassical perspective regarding retirement return. In the case of North and West Africans in receipt of a French pension, definitive return should be the rational choice, since a pension drawn in Euros will clearly stretch farther in Morocco or Mali than it does in Marseille. An employee of the Adoma company contrasted the relative perceptions of wealth in the country of origin and the country of immigration. "When they return back to their country with their pensions, they are rich people, relatively speaking in their country they are rich people, whereas of course here they are nothing of the sort, but over there they are people who have money."

However, the lack of definitive return at retirement by hostel residents calls into question these neoclassical precepts. Perceptions of individual wealth must be tempered by the size of the family in the pensioner's charge. If, for some, retirement means that there is less obligation to send remittances – “now it's up to them to get by” – for others the duty to provide for a significant number of dependants weighs heavily. Many residents I spoke to enumerated the large families in their charge. For these respondents, it does not make sense to talk of individual economic decision-making. As Amadou, from Mali, elaborated, “generally it is in the interests of the non-migrant villagers to welcome you, because any wealth is shared throughout the extended family-village community. To maintain this family link, this solidarity, this is our strength. If we lose it, we lose our strength.”

Nevertheless, this solidarity can become abused. Some respondents noted an increased materialism among relatives who remain behind, evidenced by the requests for goods such as mobile phones, TVs and DVD players which hostel residents are expected to bring as presents when they return. Amadou labelled this an “inculcated mentality of dependence-assistance”:

“The traditional type of society is in the course of being destroyed, transformed into a society of assistance and dependence... a parachuted comfort... Little by little, it accumulates, the needs are going to increase but the incomes are going to decrease [due to the rising cost of living in France and the drop in revenue experienced at retirement].”

However, a more oppressive state of dependence ensues if the general regime pension is not sufficient to meet the household's needs. In this case, the only means for the family to attain solvency is for the pensioner to remain in France for more than 6 months of the year, in order to meet the conditions of eligibility for the *minimum vieillesse*. This is a means-tested benefit which tops up a pensioner's monthly income to a minimum level, set at €621 per month in 2008. Among my own respondents, no one explicitly mentioned household dependence on the minimum vieillesse as a constraint to more

permanent return to the country of origin. However, other researchers have documented this state of affairs which prolongs the geographical separation of families after the retirement of the principal wage earner in France. Because of the minimum residence conditions, “these migrants become hostages to France, although their state of health or age would favour more a prolonged return to their family back home” (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki, 2006: 104; author's translation). What I did find in my own work, however, is that some hostel residents do have to make yet more sacrifices at retirement when their income falls in order to provide the same level of remittances for their dependants.

3.2 Losing one's bearings or returning to serve? Structuralist interpretations

The structuralist approach stressed the difficulties of re-integrating to the home context, since migrants risk losing their place within the established order of “vested interests and traditional ways of thinking” when away. This was a feature of North Africans' accounts. It is not that they have found it difficult to re-adapt to traditional lifestyles; rather, it is that norms in places of origin have changed in their absence. It is the migrants who have remained old-fashioned while new generations have altered the old village order. Many complained of having ‘lost their bearings’ in the place of origin. They had fallen out of touch with childhood friends, and talked of how they would feel awkward when bumping into old acquaintances on the street. It was for this reason that they preferred to stay at home, among their family, when back in the country of origin. Being confined to the house could soon become boring, however, and this often led to men cutting short their home visits, and returning to France.

Such a narrative was not a feature of West African respondents' accounts. The normative expectation weighing on respondents was to be of service to the community of origin at retirement, as Ali, an army veteran of Malian origin, noted:

“When you are retired, you should be of service over there; you return to better serve your village and your family... When you are alone you don't think about it. You look after yourself, and that's that... We live in this solitude, but over there

[Mali], there's more responsibility. Here [in France] we just have to take care of ourselves, our health etc, but over there, you're the dad, you're the head of the family who must look after everyone, who must take care of all sorts of problems.”

For those who live at least some of the year in the hostel in France, such service takes place via village associations, which are often headquartered in hostels. Through such associations, hostel residents wield power in their local communities, despite their physical absence. As Catherine Quiminal notes, these associations have “transformed the absence of each migrant into a prominent political presence in the home village” (2002: 40; author's translation).

The West African village associations clearly have the potential to alter the social structures of the home community, its local elites, and traditional ways of thinking. However, it is a moot point whether returnees transform or reinforce the established order. Returning at retirement is respectful. Returnees gain respect from villagers remaining behind for having fulfilled, albeit belatedly, their family duties; not in the sense of providing for their family – which they obviously do through remittances – but rather to maintain the established order in the village, because when the head of the family is away, “things are done which should not be done”. This duty to return was referred to by Massamba, from Mali, as a “moral imperative”.

3.3 The “pressure of communicability”: evidence for a transnational view

The importance of the institutionalisation of migrant-homeland ties via the village associations indicates that a transnational approach may be warranted. Indeed, one could argue that the retired hostel residents embody the transnationalist paradigm, given their remittances, their frequent home visits, and the constant allusions made to family members back home during interviews. Furthermore, the motivation for mobility at retirement is justified on the grounds of affective ties to home communities, as is stressed in transnational accounts. It is only those hostel residents with a history of family conflict for whom return trips are not such a constant feature. This was stressed

in the comments of one of my respondents who coordinates a citizens' advice service for hostel residents:

“Almost everyone... the majority of residents do them [the return trips]; the people who have stayed, who stay here definitively and who have their families over there, they are few and far between... Unless there is a family problem, there are some men, I know a few where that is the case, but either its a separation with the wife, or it's.... [voice trails off]. So they go once every four or five years, quite simply because when they go over there, they aren't happy so they prefer to stay here in peace and quiet. But the majority, no, they do the *aller-retours*, they go and see their kids, their wives, their families.”

Other aspects which encourage a transnational reading are related to the empirical conditions for regular and sustained migrant-homeland interactions as discussed above. Admittedly, in terms of one of the three factors underlined here – the institutionalisation of transnationalism by home and host governments – there is little data to suggest that much attention is paid to elderly migrants. According to one respondent, the consulates and homeland authorities take no interest in their ageing compatriots. “They don't give a damn... If they did there would be studies commissioned, with numbers and statistics on the people who have returned etc.”

However, in relation to two other domains – ease of communication and transport – these factors appear significant in generating particular patterns of back-and-forth migration at retirement mobility, most notably regarding duration and regularity of return trips. In terms of transport, the pricing policy of airlines can weigh heavily. This is the case in particular for Malians. In contrast to the relatively cheap air travel to Senegal from France, there are no charter flights to Mali, only scheduled flights offered by national carriers. Air France for example no longer sells single tickets; it only offers return journeys, which become more affordable the shorter the trip. According to Massamba, a return trip of a month or less costs in the region of €700 to €900, but for a trip lasting more than a month, the price practically doubles, to between €1300 and €1400. Airlines' policies on luggage weight allowance and cost per excess kilo are also

factored into hostel residents' decision-making. For North Africans, whose transport options include not only air travel but also bus and ferry travel, the luggage consideration can be important. Abdelkarim from Algeria preferred the plane over the bus, as the journey can be just as cheap as the bus (around €100) and much shorter, “just two or three hours and you’re home. The only thing with the plane is that you can't take very much luggage”, but he joked, “I take nothing, just a sandwich!” Frailer hostel residents may also prefer the plane over the bus, since the two and a half day journey to Morocco can be physically gruelling. However, for other residents with lots of grandchildren who expect grandpa to bring toys, new clothes and other gifts, the bus is preferable since it is possible to transport much more luggage at no extra charge.

As for communication with loved ones, this can be a very central and daily feature of life for hostel residents. This becomes obvious as soon as one enters certain hostels, with people selling international phone cards at the main entrances. Many respondents reported making daily or near-daily telephone calls with family. Such regularity in communications was not always possible, indeed it seems that this only became a feature of residents' lives following the expansion of access to mobile phone communications in origin countries. Crucially, the regularity of communication is also attributed as a factor in hostel residents' mobility decisions. Until recently, hostel residents didn't have mobile phones, there was just the payphone in the hostel. Likewise, in the places of origin, communications were limited. For example in Massamba's case, there were only a couple of landlines in his village in Mali. But now everyone has a mobile phone, both in the hostel and more importantly in the country of origin. Every wife has a phone, so the men are constantly in contact with their families back home. And this creates a certain pressure; the residents are much more aware of everything going on in the village, and their responsibilities weigh heavier. Massamba referred to this as the “pressure of communicability” (*la pression de la communicabilité*). He felt it was one reason why return trips were becoming more frequent among West African hostel residents; they need to return more regularly to reassure themselves that all is well back home.

In light of improved communications, transport options, and the institutionalisation of

village associations, the transnational approach seems particularly apt for explaining the regularity and duration of back-and-forth trips. However, when confronted with the justifications for why residents keep on coming back to France, which is the focus of the next section, the explanatory variables identified by the transnationalism literature appear too partial.

3.4 *“Vos papiers, Monsieur.” Inclusion in healthcare and bureaucratic organisations*

Time and again, I was struck by the fact that hostel residents felt compelled to justify their presence in France. This justification was offered without me having requested it, and often within a few minutes of meeting. What was striking about this self-justification was that it was based on one or both of the following elements – healthcare and administrative reasons.

As Soulaymane, from eastern Senegal, made clear in one of my early interviews: “There are only two things which bring people back to France – healthcare and paperwork.” Another man, of Algerian origin, when I told him that I was doing a study on retired people living in migrant worker hostels, hurriedly declared: “We are only here for healthcare.” Hamadou, of Malian origin and a delegate on the residents' committee of his hostel, was a few months away from his retirement date when I met him. He summed up the situation well:

“The only thing I'm thinking about is to sort my papers out and then leave, it's the first thing which comes into my head... But we don't leave definitively. There are always administrative problems to sort out... Health can be another reason for return, but not for minor complaints, only if you are really and truly ill. You've contributed to social security after all.”

With advancing years, health problems become a more pressing concern and the hostel residents, although not experiencing a greater incidence of ill health compared to the rest of the resident population, tend to experience a state of dependence at a younger age than average (Hadjiat and Fevotte, 2008). As for paperwork, this includes tasks such

as: initiating the payment of one's pension; nominating someone to act as a proxy for one's French bank account; claiming a reimbursement for medical expenses incurred abroad; completing the annual income declaration form⁵.

Proponents of economic theories might argue that healthcare and paperwork can be reduced to a simple utility calculation; the French healthcare system is heavily subsidised for all, and free to the least well off. To benefit from an equivalent standard of care in the country of origin would require recourse to what can be a very costly private sector. Similarly, in terms of administrative tasks, proponents of economic theories would contend that the only reason to keep paperwork in order in France is financial, such as proving eligibility for certain welfare benefits.

In reply, I contend that the prominence of such justifications for continued residence in France past retirement is not merely an economic rationale. Residence and mobility decisions are also constrained by a requirement to meet expectations of inclusion in French healthcare and legal-bureaucratic systems, so as to have continuity of care and to ensure that their entitlements are recognised. Such an interpretation does not seek to dismiss rational actor utility-based theories; rather the requirements for inclusion in the organisations of functionally differentiated society, as theorised by Niklas Luhmann, broaden the scope of what a rational choice in return decision-making can be.

For example with healthcare, respondents were concerned with ensuring a continuity of care and treatment. Certain treatments and drugs are not available in the country of origin. Abdelkarim is not able to get the particular diabetes drugs upon which he relies. This is one reason why he returns to France periodically, in order to renew his prescription for this medication. There are also relationships of trust to consider. This was broached by a geriatrics specialist who works for one of the major hostel companies: "the residents in general have a great confidence in the French healthcare system, be it their doctors, be it the hospital. They have a great confidence and a great respect." According to a recent medical survey carried out in five hostels in the Paris region, half of the 242 respondents were following a daily treatment. The immense majority had a GP that they saw several times per year, and nearly a third were currently

seeing a specialist doctor of some kind (El Moubaraki and Bitatsi Trachet, 2006). This bears out the confidence and relationships of trust that hostel residents have established with the healthcare system in France.

Turning to paperwork, again the rationale is not just a cost-benefit calculation for the hostel residents. What is at stake is their legitimacy to grow old in France: the right to a pension as a deferred salary, the right to a good standard of medical care, the right to home help services. In fact, the issue cuts to the very identity of the hostel residents. At retirement, a renegotiation of identity is necessary in order to compensate for the redundancy of the former *raison d'être* which was employment (Bolzman et al., 2006). This can be a difficult readjustment, as a delegate of Unafo (the Union of social housing professionals) made clear:

“I was struck once by a migrant worker who told me during a meeting, '*Now at retirement age I am experiencing all over again the feelings I had when I was 20 years old and newly arrived in France. I am as lost at 60 years of age with my retirement and future before me as I was when I arrived at age 20.*' Why? Because they have to swap this identity of worker – which is an identity of flesh and bone, an identity uniquely of labour and body – for an identity of papers, for everything which is entailed in having one's rights recognised – they have to prove a rightful presence in France, they have to prove an entitlement to a pension.”

Thus, in order to maintain a continuity of treatment, hostel residents plan their *va-et-vient* trips around appointments with doctors and consultants, and ensure that they have sufficient quantities of medication for the planned period of absence from France. By keeping in good order their travel documents and other officially recognised proofs of identity, domicile, and income, hostel residents are able to ensure that their claims are recognised by the pertinent authorities. This illustrates their high degree of inclusion in healthcare and administrative systems.

4. Conclusion

The transition to retirement can be an appropriate juncture for return migration since it implies the lifting of the sedentary constraint of participation in the labour market. As the PRI survey shows, however, most older immigrants in France prefer to live out their retirement in France, experienced as a time of repose surrounded by children and grandchildren. The PRI team argued that their results supported an “integrated ageing” hypothesis. However, the PRI indicators of settlement did not seem to apply in the case of retired migrant worker hostel residents whose families have remained in the country of origin. Counter-intuitively, despite their lack of integration to host country reference groups and maintenance of home ties, the hostel residents do not return definitively to be with their families at retirement. Instead they go back-and-forth between the hostel in France and the place of origin.

To unpack this puzzle, several alternative theories of migration were presented and then evaluated against qualitative data from interviews conducted in several hostels in the Paris region in spring and summer 2008. This evaluation has shown that at various points in the data there is support for several theories. This does not imply that the theories concerned are too vague to be of any analytical use. Rather, the added value of each theory becomes most apparent when levels of analysis are kept distinct (Massey et al., 1993).

Neoclassical economic explanations taking the individual as the unit of analysis were not validated since they predicted permanent return for retiring hostel residents; purchasing power differentials mean that a pension drawn in euros buys more in the country of origin than in France. Yet for retired hostel residents, it did not make sense to talk of individual economic decision-making, given the number of dependent family members. The new economics of labour migration, with its focus on the utility-maximising household as the decision-making unit, made much more sense of the crucial role remittances have played and continue to play at the end of working life.

At the level of the extended kinship and village community, the structuralist focus on vested interests and traditional ways of thinking in the home context also illuminated the data, in particular some of the contrasts between North and West African retired

hostel residents. Many North Africans alluded to having lost their place and bearings in the home community. West Africans, on the other hand, mentioned the normative expectation of return at retirement in order to serve their home communities. They had been able to convert a physical absence into a political presence via their village associations.

Moving to the intermediate meso-level (Faist, 2000), the institutionalisation of the village associations suggested that a transnational approach was warranted. Indeed, the geographically single hostel residents appear at first sight to be archetypal transnationalists given their life-long remittances and regular home visits. This impression is cemented by the allusions to transport and communications in hostel residents' accounts. Nevertheless, while the explanatory variables identified by the transnational approach seem well-equipped to explain regularity and duration of back-and-forth trips, they were not able to account for why hostel residents keep on coming back to France.

For this, it was necessary to move up to the macro level of social systems. Retired hostel residents justified their presence in France on the grounds of healthcare and administrative reasons. It was shown that mobility decisions are constrained by requirements for inclusion in healthcare organisations, so as to maintain relationships of trust with medical professionals and to assure a continuity of medication and treatment. The same applies to administrative agencies. By keeping in good order their travel documents and other officially recognised proofs of identity, domicile, and income, hostel residents were able to ensure that their claims were recognised by the relevant authorities.

This paper began with the puzzle that the geographically single hostel residents are an un-integrated, unsettled population who nonetheless remain in France past retirement. The wider implication of the social systems approach to migration questions what (re)integration in host (and home) countries means. Conventional approaches to integration view society as constituted by individuals in big groups, such as the family, the ethnic group, the social class, or the nation. A social systems approach by contrast

argues that individuals achieve inclusion only in the organisations of functionally differentiated society, and it is in these organisations that integration occurs. If the latter approach is taken, the starting assumption that hostel residents are inherently un-integrated becomes harder to sustain.

Notes

¹ Several factors conspired in the decision of post-war French governments to follow a policy of hostel building for migrant workers: the public health imperative of slum and shanty town clearance; speed and low cost of construction; a desire to limit family reunification by making hostel accommodation the normal form of accommodation for labour migrants in France; and the need for control and surveillance during an era which witnessed the Algerian war, the events of May 1968, and fractious industrial relations. For further details see Bernardot, 1999; Viet, 1999.

² Sonacotral changed its name in 1963, dropping the 'L' from the acronym (and thereby its focus on housing just Algerian workers) to become Sonacotra. The company undertook a more radical re-branding in 2007 when it became Adoma. For reasons of clarity, from this point on I shall refer exclusively to this organisation by the name Adoma. Over time, other hostel management companies were created, and there are now some 35 such companies. Most of these are very small operations. Adoma is by far the largest, housing some 65,000 immigrants, and is unique thanks to the majority stake which the government has always had in the company.

³ Note that it is rare to find mixed-ethnicity hostels. Generally, hostels house either a majority-North African population, or a majority West African population. While North Africans live in hostels all over France, West Africans have tended to concentrate in hostels in the Paris region.

⁴ Direct citations appearing in the text have been translated by the author.

⁵ Upon completion of the income declaration form (*Déclaration des revenus*), a statement of taxable income (*Avis d'imposition*) is issued. This latter document is crucial for anyone who needs to prove eligibility for means-tested benefits. It is also useful in that fiscal domicile can be given as proof of principal residence, which is necessary for other administrative tasks. The declaration form is issued annually, at the beginning of May, and needs to be signed and returned by the end of that month. The importance of this administrative task is clear when one considers that May is the peak period in terms of hostel occupancy. Peak occupancy rates at this time are directly attributed to this administrative requirement (Unafo, 2006).

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